TRUE RELIGION
October 25, 2009

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Psalm 34:1–10
Mark 8:27–38

"Those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake,
and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."
Mark 8:35 (NRSV)

With all kinds of opportunities
to tell people what to think,
he instead told them what to do.
Wash feet. Give your stuff away.
Share your food. Favor reprobates.
Pray for those who are out to get you.
Be the first to say "I'm sorry."

Barbara Brown Taylor
An Altar in the World

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Awaken us to your presence.
Inspire us to join you in the redemption of the world
and the care and healing of its people.
Give us courage to live our lives fully
by giving them away for the sake of Jesus, our Lord.
Amen.

Those three paragraphs in Mark 8:27–38, fifteen sentences, are so important that they appear exactly the same in the three Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Each of those Gospels tells the story slightly differently, with different emphases. Matthew tells us more about Jesus the teacher; Luke's emphasis is Jesus the compassionate healer. But one thing they all agree about is that these three paragraphs are essential and that they belong right in the middle of the story.

In fact, they are so loaded with significance the preacher usually separates them and talks about one, or maybe two, of the three:

The question of Jesus' identity—"Who do people say I am? Who do you say I am?"

The matter of Jesus predicting his own suffering and death, and Peter's refusal to hear it

The whole business of picking up a cross, denying self, giving life away in order to find life—or the reverse, saving life and in the process losing it

There's a lot going on here, and it's a little difficult to keep it all together this morning, particularly on Reformation Sunday, which someone characterized as the day when Protestants used to bash the pope and thank God they're not Catholic (something we don't do much anymore, thanks be to God, and don't have to do today, because the Vatican did it for us last week, a few days before Reformation Sunday, by inviting unhappy Anglican priests to return to Catholicism and to bring their wives with them: an unfortunate exploitation of a church, Anglican, American Episcopal, struggling with issues of gender and sexuality and suffering for it; the thought occurred to me, can an invitation to unhappy Presbyterians be far behind? We have plenty of people unhappy and angry over those same issues; on the other hand, the Roman Church is probably far too wise to invite in a group of unhappy Calvinists). So today we focus on Reformation Sunday, and in the rhythm of the calendar, it is also the Sunday when we talk about money, as in giving some of it—more of it, if truth were told—to the church: all of that on top of this key scripture passage. That's a lot for one sermon, but let's have at it.

The story is pivotal. Jesus' disciples have been following him around Galilee, a lovely, hilly, rural area in the north of modern Israel, or Palestine, as it was called in the Roman Empire. They were attracted to him because of his unique teaching, his healing, and his personal charisma. It doesn't appear that the question of who he was ever came up. He was Jesus, of Nazareth, a young teacher, an itinerant rabbi. So it is startling when he wants to know what people were saying about him, who they thought he was, and then turned the question to them: "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter blurts out something so amazing, so radical, so potentially blasphemous that it must have taken their breath away: "You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God." You could say that Peter's answer is the very heart of Christian faith: Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God.

Then Jesus tells them that God's Messiah will suffer and die. And Peter, the first to confess that Jesus is Lord and Christ, also becomes the first person in history to misunderstand—or refuse to understand what that means. Peter is having nothing of this suffering and dying business. Everyone knows that God's Messiah will come to restore the fortunes of Israel, and at the moment, that meant dealing with the Romans: confronting them,

fomenting a revolution, and driving them into the sea. That's the Messiah everyone wanted and was waiting and praying for. A suffering and dying Messiah is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

And he didn't stop there. If you want to continue to follow me, it won't be easy. Following me, Jesus said, is like volunteering to die, giving your life away. I wonder if they ever heard the rest of it; I wonder if we can hear it— if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it, and if you save your life, you lose it.

The scholarly community points out that there is a scandal here, the scandal of particularity, they call it. Ordinarily when people start to talk about God, the language is inclined to get a little abstract. Our own founding documents, the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechism*, written by Presbyterian Calvinists a century after the Reformation, say that God is "a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being: wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." Well, all right: true enough. But Matthew, Mark, and Luke insist that God is best described by the life of this particular Palestinian Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. That's the scandal of particularity.

And then there is this scandalous and counterintuitive notion that because Jesus is the Christ, he will suffer and die. Finally, the most counterintuitive scandal of all: that you can save your life by learning how to give it away (see Martha Moore-Keish in *Feasting on the Word*). There is no more urgent, personal, urgent issue for Peter and James and John, for you and me, than this— saving your own life, living your own life, as fully and completely as possible.

There is no end to advice on how to do this, no end to what we might call "happiness literature." One of the best of the lot is *Seven Pleasures* by Willard Spiegelman, professor of English at SMU. A *Tribune* review observed that "most of the self-help manuals are written for people who haven't managed to make themselves very happy." But literature generally is much more interested in human misery and unhappiness. It was Tolstoy who observed that happy families are uninteresting. "Melancholy," Spiegelman says, "receives much more literary respect than happiness." Why, for instance, are we so mesmerized by those dreadful reality television shows except for the reason that watching human misery is enjoyable? What is it about *John and Kate Plus 8* that we can't resist, that earns them cover articles on national magazines? Even academics are asking why we care about this. The answer seems to be that just as we can't resist craning our necks to see a car wreck, so this marriage meltdown for John and Kate is "Schadenfreude at its best—or worst; enjoying someone else's pain." Frank Rich, in the *New York Times* this morning wrote about our fascination with the exploits of "Balloon Boy," little Falcon Heene. The media gives this stuff

to us and we watch and love it, because, Rich proposes, “no matter what our own faults as parents, we could never top Richard Heene, who mercilessly exploited his child for fame and profit.”

There is a lot of bad advice out there on how to be happy. Spiegelman’s *Seven Pleasures* is pretty good, as far as it goes. His seven, for the record, are reading, walking, looking, dancing, listening, swimming, and writing. His advice is simple and sound: identify what makes you happy and then do it.

The problem with that is not only that it doesn’t go nearly far enough, but it doesn’t begin to stand up to and offer us an alternative to a culture that over and over again, every day of our lives, from morning to night, in all the media, television, newspapers, magazines, in our mail, in the thick glossy catalogs that clog our mailboxes and the postal service, on the Internet, on the side of buses, billboards, and in every shop window inundates us with a promise: “Buy this and you will be happy.” It has the evangelical power of a religion. In fact, there is a recurrent eye-catching ad in the *Sunday New York Times Magazine*: an attractive young woman in tight white jeans with high boots, a leather jacket seductively open, leaning against a gleaming Harley-Davidson motorcycle. It was the two words—in large letters across the top of the full-page ad that caught my attention: “True Religion.” I wasn’t sure whether it meant the girl or the motorcycle. Turns out it is the jeans. “True Religion” is a brand of pricey jeans, from $175 to $500. Nice ad. But it’s not true. It’s a lie.

David Meyers, a social scientist, wrote the book *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*. Meyers observes that “income increases . . . seem not to matter much. . . . The doubling of affluence over the last half century has not increased our happiness one iota, despite all the things you and I love about our lives today—from air-conditioning to the Internet to Post-it notes.” Meyers says, “Happy lives are instead marked by positive traits such as optimism and a sense of personal control; by close relationships and by participating in faith communities that entail support, meaning, and hope.”

Walter Brueggemann, in a new book, *An Unsettling God*, says that a time of uncertainty and the recent economic downturn is “an invitation to return to old and deep resources of faith that continue in the present with compelling authority” (p. 27).

For example, Brueggemann points out, the Bible regards wealth not as a private acquisition but a common resource for the enhancement of the community. Brueggemann is prophetic and brave enough to refer to the Old Testament warning that “greed can kill,” with citations from Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. In fact, Brueggemann suggests, it almost did and the great

lesson of this experience with recession is that greed is as lethal as the Old Testament prophets warned. We are all, finally, in this together, Brueggemann says, and the wholeness and health of the society and all of its citizens, particularly its weakest and most vulnerable, is the overwhelming priority of the Bible and, I would add, the source of personal happiness and contentment.

So “true religion” is not a pair of jeans, a stock portfolio; it is not what you own and consume; true religion is a society and economy that attends to its own most vulnerable and, according to Jesus, who we dare to believe was the Christ, the very essence and truth of God, true religion is giving your life away—and finding it in the process.

There are a lot of reasons for giving money to the church. We did a self-study a few years ago, and people of this congregation said they wanted straight talk when it came to money and church finances. Ministers are inclined to leap at the closest euphemism when it comes to money, rather than talking about and asking for it. Our own members said they wanted it straight. So here it is:

> Everything we do here costs money, a lot of it: from providing four public worship services every week to classes for the children; youth groups for teenagers; support groups for new mothers; comfort and counseling for the anxious; maintaining a building on one of the busiest street corners in the world, where people come all day, every day, to rest, pray, in early morning to find self-help for addictions, a safe place for infants, a day school for toddlers, and in the evening a place for an urban youngsters to meet dependable, caring adults for tutoring; a place for a noontime sandwich, a warm coat, a listening ear, a nutritious hot meal; and a place where a small army of men and women, old and young, volunteer and invest time and creativity here and throughout the world—in Cuba, Africa, Central America. The price: $10 million next year.

More straight talk:

> We get some of that from investments: money given to the church by faithful members in the past who wanted their church to thrive in the future, beyond their own lives. We keep a careful eye on those precious investments. They will provide approximately $2 million of the needed 10 next year.
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> As is the case with every institution that relies, at least in part, on investment income, we will feel the effects of a significant decrease in market value that has taken place over the past two years. That same economic downturn simultaneously precipitated greater need for church social services. For instance, we used to provide Sunday night supper for

100 people in our dining room. With the economic downturn, the lines waiting for Sunday night supper and for bag lunches at noon grew dramatically. So we moved the supper to the largest space we have, increased the number of guests by 50 percent—and the costs increased as well. And there is still more need.

We live with the mythology of wealth. The newspapers continue to attach the adjective “tony” to Fourth Presbyterian Church, or “upscale” or “wealthy.” Relatively, we are wealthy but our congregation has changed dramatically over the decades. We are no longer the church for only the well-to-do. Most of our members are relatively young and relatively not well-to-do. Our per capita giving doesn’t come close to other similar congregations our size. And the percentage of our members who make pledges continues to hover around 30 percent. Another 10 percent contribute but don’t pledge, which means that 40 percent of our 6,100 members help with expenses and 60 percent do not.

The truth is everything we do relies on voluntary contributions: $2 million comes from fees and grants, $2 million from investments, and $6 million of the $10 million comes from you and others like you. Every pledge, every gift, large or small, matters a great deal.

That’s the straight talk. And those are the reasons for giving your money. But that’s not the whole story at all. It’s not even close. An old mentor of mine used to say, if the only issue is raising money, raffle a Buick.

The real reason to give is something Jesus said on that pivotal, important day long ago: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it.”

A young friend of mine, Jason Byassee, writes for the *Christian Century*, teaches at Duke Divinity School, and has written a delightful book about his experience as a pastor of a small Methodist congregation in North Carolina. He writes, “Belonging, being part of something bigger than ourselves [is] . . . the most health-giving thing you can do. . . . Meet with people, work on something together. We’re wired as human beings to want something to give our lives for. We’re meant to give our lives to God” (*The Gift of the Small Church*, p. 76 of galley proofs).

Jason is young and so good at being thirtyish, with all that entails, that being around him for very long makes me feel like I’m 100. He asks, “What happens to a generation designed, as all people are, to give ourselves to something bigger than ourselves, when we are reluctant to give ourselves to anything much more demanding of commitment than an X-Box or Facebook page? We shrivel up. We become hollow. Shadows of selves.”

Jesus said that's the way to lose the only life you'll ever have.

So there are two reasons to give: When you do, your church comes alive and good things happen in the world. But even more importantly, when you give, you come alive. I think we all know the truth of that somewhere deep in our hearts.

It was a very great honor for Fourth Presbyterian Church and for me personally to host a memorial service this fall for recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor who died last year. There is an organization of Medal of Honor recipients. The truth is that many recipients receive the award posthumously, but survivors have a convention every year, and this year it was in Chicago. We were asked to host the memorial service, and of course, we were honored to do so. On the morning of September 18, buses full of old soldiers and sailors, marines and their families, pulled up on Michigan Avenue. There was a cohort of mounted Chicago Police. An Army Honor Guard fired a twenty-one-gun salute, and young Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine men and women, in full dress uniforms, were on hand to honor the fallen.

I welcomed everyone, gave the opening prayer, and then sat down to listen as five men who had died in the past year were remembered. All were World War II combat veterans, each having performed incredible acts of heroism, courage, and unbelievable self-sacrifice on behalf of their friends and families and nation:

Russell Dunham, Kayserberg, France, January 8, 1945
Robert Nett, Philippine Islands, December 14, 1944
Everett Pope, Peleliu Island, September 19, 1944
James Swett, Solomon Islands, April 4, 1943
George Wahlen, Iwo Jima, March 3, 1945

In a moment of extreme danger, each of these men, then in their twenties, reached deep within their own hearts and decided to risk life itself, to give everything any one of us has to give, for friends, family, nation.

It was a good and holy moment to be able to say thank you to God for them.

Not many of us will have to make that particular decision. But every one of us does make that decision in one way or another:

to lose our lives—not save or hoard them, but lose them
to live for the children—our own, or our nation's children, the world's children
to give our life to a beloved who needs us
to live for a school, a college, a university, a seminary, a church

- to give life for some great cause that will make life more human and the world better
- to give so that the most vulnerable will be cared for—the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the homeless sheltered
- to give sacrificially, to give life away for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel

That is the invitation in this scandalous little story.

“Those who lose their lives for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save them.”

In fact, that’s true religion.

Amen.